

JANAKI: Princeton, April 1968

On Tuesday, April 2, 1968--a day when my life started to change--I was eating lunch at Princeton with other participants at a conference on "America in a Revolutionary World." The meeting was, rather oddly, co-sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton and the American Friends Service Committee.

Most of the others at my table clearly represented the AFSC sponsorship, judging by their looks and the tales they were telling. They were the first activists from the antinuclear movement of the Fifties and the Sixties' civil rights and antiwar movements I had ever met. A number of them had been to jail repeatedly for civil disobedience actions, or to prison for draft resistance going back to Korea and World War II.

Their lives and mine were parallel in some respects, intersecting in others, both in ironic ways. Like me, they abhorred nuclear weapons. But some of them had sailed in the mid-Fifties into the Bikini test zone, on the sailing-ship Golden Rule, to oppose nuclear testing; whereas I, a few years later, was working on nuclear war plans, hoping to stave off a Soviet surprise attack during the period of the supposed "missile gap."

Now we were all against the Vietnam war. Who wasn't, in April 1968? But Bob Eaton and others at this table, on the example of the "Golden Rule," had sailed a similar vessel, the Phoenix, into Haiphong harbor in North Vietnam with a load of medicine. From there they had sailed to South Vietnam, where the ship was turned away, at a time when I was working in the Embassy in Saigon.

I actually recalled a session at the Embassy when photos were passed around of their aborted press conference, when they were pelted with eggs by Vietnamese in civilian clothes. Douglas Pike, sitting at the table as a USIA officer, identified some of the "civilians" in the photos as secret police. I had felt embarrassed, as an American official, at the treatment of these countrymen; it was amazing to find myself at the same table with them now.

With respect to the subject of the conference, it seemed safe to assume that they were sympathetic to a variety of revolutionary causes. I had been invited, presumably at the suggestion of the Princeton sponsor, to come there from the Rand Corporation. My interest in the conference stemmed from my past and current work on averting or defeating Communist-led revolutions. Although I would not have used the term counterrevolution, or even thought of it--I heard it exactly once in my government experience¹--I was there as a professional counterrevolutionary.

I had apprenticed at that trade in Vietnam. For two years I had worked on "pacification," which could have been--though it wasn't, in US official circles--defined as rural counterrevolution. Just one month earlier the Tet Offensive that exploded on January 31 had proven that everything that I and my colleagues had done had been totally unsuccessful.

That was not a surprise to me. I had not only written doctrine for pacification at the Embassy, I had evaluated--on the ground and sometimes in combat--its application and consequences in the countryside. My current research project at Rand was titled Lessons from Vietnam, but it was no secret that I was exploring almost entirely what I saw as lessons from failure.

Nor was I looking to apply those lessons to better effect in Vietnam, except to get us out of that conflict. From the time of my return in the summer of '67, the Vietnamese war of independence was one revolution I did not want to see my country try to counter any more). Tet had simply confirmed, spectacularly, much of what I had been trying to tell the government for about two years. The war was an endless, hopeless, bloody stalemate. Americans must stop killing and dying in Vietnam.

The President had finally gotten the message. Just two nights before, on Sunday, March 31, in the midst of packing to come to the conference, I watched on television as Lyndon Johnson told the nation that he was halting the bombing of northern North Vietnam, calling for negotiations, and would not run for renomination as President.

During the first plenary session at Princeton, a founder of SDS, Tom Hayden, now one of the main speakers on the platform, announced, "We have just toppled a President, or come as close to it as our system allows. We have ended a war."

"We". Hayden would not have had me in mind. Yet certainly, despite my Defense Department background, I wanted to believe the war was over as much as anyone there. (It was not, nor was it ending; Hayden was wrong about that).

I had even played a small role, perhaps, during the preceding month in forming the President's decision to withdraw, by revealing Top Secret information--my first leaks ever--to Senator Robert Kennedy and to the New York Times. Just a week before the Princeton conference, the Wall Street Journal had reported on its front page that a hundred FBI agents, on orders from the President, were looking for the source of those particular stories, i.e., for me.

That is a different story from the one I have started to tell just now. It comes to me now--I will be writing it eventually--as I realize that I have spoken of that secret episode so seldom to anyone, I tend not to take it into account in my own mind when I describe the steps that led me to the release of the Pentagon Papers.

I usually trace the origin of my awareness of civil disobedience as a practice and a moral choice to the Princeton encounter I am about to describe. And in those terms, that is true. Yet just weeks before this meeting, I had very consciously been risking arrest and prison--or, I thought more likely, the total ending of my career--with actions very like my later release of the Pentagon Papers, and for the same reason: in hopes of avoiding disastrous new escalation in the war.

Even as I sat down to lunch with the assorted jailbirds and peace criminals from AFSC--the first such I had ever met--the chief security investigator in the Pentagon was (I learned years later) recommending my own prosecution. For what I was about to hear, I was--it occurs to me for the first time as I write this--ready.

For this. A young woman is sitting almost directly across the lunch table from me. She is dark, almost black, from India, wearing a sari; on her forehead is a dot of red dust. She is talking, in a lilting voice to some friends on my side of the table; I want not to stare at her, and don't try to listen to her conversation. But in a moment of silence around us, as she responds to someone's remark about "enemies," I hear her voice saying the words:

"I come from a culture in which there is no concept of 'enemy.'"

A strange statement. Hardly comprehensible. (No concept of enemy? How about sun and moon, friend, water?) If it had come from someone less striking I might have puzzled over it for a moment, then let it slip. But she was...beautiful, her speech was like singing, and I looked hard at her and asked, "What do you mean by that?"

The tradition of her family, she told me, was Gandhian. The sense of what she said--I don't remember her exact words--was this. In Gandhi's teaching, no human should be regarded or treated as an enemy because, simply, no one is an enemy--someone you have a right to destroy, or to hate, or to harm; or to regard as alien, from whom you cannot learn, for whom you can feel no understanding or concern.

No one should be seen as being evil or as utterly antagonistic, as being an evil person: as if they were without good in them, or as if they were unchangeable.

This was so even though what people do is often evil, in the sense that it demands not only to be condemned but to be resisted, militantly--nonviolently, without causing harm--even at the risk of one's own life. Yet in opposing people's wrongdoing, trying to change their hearts and their actions and protect others from their harmful behavior, one need not, should not destroy them or threaten them with harm, i.e., do evil. Thus, since one should not either categorize or treat people as enemies, the notion was not needed.

Perhaps she didn't say all this just then. She spoke--very well--only a few minutes. What I caught was that she was, after all, describing coherent concepts, that hung together in a way totally unfamiliar to me, and challenging.

I came from a culture in which the concept of "enemy" was central, seemingly indispensable. The culture of Rand, the Marines, the Defense and State Departments, international and domestic politics, game theory and bargaining theory.

Identifying enemies, understanding and predicting them so as better to fight and control them, analyzing the relations of abstract enemies--all that had been for years my daily bread and butter, part of the air I breathed. To try to operate in the world of men and nations without the concept of "enemy" would have seemed as difficult, as nearly inconceivable, as doing arithmetic like the Romans, without a zero.

This new Gandhian algebra she was describing intrigued me. She was not proposing to forego the notions of conflict, opposition, struggle, resistance, or moral judgment; on the contrary, as I came to understand, all these were essential to Gandhi's way of thinking and acting, but she was describing a new way of reasoning about them and of relating to them.

It wasn't the only way to think, but I saw immediately that it was, for me, a genuinely new way, and one that made some sense. That didn't turn up very often. And as I say, she was beautiful, and her voice was like music. I wanted to hear more.

We made a date to talk the next morning. After breakfast, we talked through the morning session of the conference, had lunch and talked through the afternoon session and into the night.

Her name was Janaki. She was from south India, the region of Madras; the red dust on her forehead was the caste-mark of a Shivaite Brahmin. Her parents were committed followers of

Mohandas Gandhi, and she had worked for years in the sarvodaya movement, the Gandhian "constructive action" movement aiming at rural transformation led by Gandhi's disciple Vinoba Bhave, along with the Bhoodan movement seeking land-gifts from the rich to villages and landless peasants.

In '63 she had walked across India to the Chinese border--to the dismay of Bhave, whose sense of nationalism during wartime overcame his pacifism--to protest India's role in the India-China war. She ate no meat, wore nothing from animals that had been slaughtered. (I had a new leather briefcase, which I liked very much. "It's beautiful," she said. "What was it?")

She spoke a good deal of Martin Luther King, and urged me to read his Stride Toward Freedom, along with The Conquest of Violence by Joan Bondurant and Barbara Deming's Revolution and Equilibrium; three books that I later read and reread until I found myself...converted.

She began to get me excited about King. I had never thought much about him, and I certainly hadn't known his concept of militant nonviolent action, didn't know that it was more than a sentiment or a constraint.

What I was learning from Janaki--what appealed to me intellectually, which was the fastest way to get my attention--was that there was a theory to this, a coherent doctrine, a relevant body of evidence: all of it new to me, intellectually challenging, persuasive, a new way of understanding problems and possibilities, perhaps a way of bringing about real change. Revolutionary change.

I had scarcely been aware of the strength of King's opposition to the war, public since just a year before; I was amazed at the power of the speeches she showed me. She urged me to meet with him, and I decided I must. He sounded like no one I had ever come across; her account gave me a sense of hope for what might come to happen in America that I had found, just in the last few months and in a different way, in Robert Kennedy.

We didn't go back to the conference. We stayed with each other and talked through the next day as well. I was in love with her. At the end of that day we turned on the evening news and learned that Martin Luther King had been killed. Washington was burning.

ENDNOTE

1. One day in the spring of 1964--it must have been about April 4, almost exactly four years before this meeting--I was standing in the passageway in the offices of International Security Affairs (ISA) in the Pentagon, when the Assistant Secretary, John T. McNaughton, came over to the xerox machine with a batch of cables in his hand, to copy one himself. I recognized the subject of the cables he was holding; they were dispatches from Brazil, mainly from Lincoln Gordon, US Ambassador to Brazil, dealing with a military coup that was taking place in Brazil on that day.

I had not yet joined McNaughton as his Special Assistant, but I spent a good deal of time that year in ISA, kibitzing mainly on nuclear policy. My best friend and close colleague, Harry Rowen, was McNaughton's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Plans and Policy, and at his invitation I regularly read the documents lying on his desk when I was in the office, so that I would know what was concerning him and could make useful comments. Latin America was far from my area of knowledge and concern, but it happened that I had read this particular file of cables that morning on Harry's desk.

Even though I was ignorant of the background to this day's "take" of cables, it was clear from these dispatches that Gordon--a former Harvard professor, like McNaughton--had had precise foreknowledge, at least, of the coup and that his knowledge of the ongoing takeover was detailed and intimate. It was also clear that he favored the success of the coup, which was replacing an elected civilian leader, Goulart, who, I gathered, was considered "radical"--he had just nationalised oil, I later learned--with a more reliably "pro-American" military junta.

After he had copied a document, McNaughton paused before he returned to his office and waved the handful of cables at me, posing a question that took for granted I knew their subject and the events of the day.

"Could it be," he said, in an unwontedly reflective tone (I remember very clearly the intonations of his voice at that moment), "that the foreign policy of the United States is nothing but counter-revolution?"

He waited for a comment from me, but I had none to give. I had never addressed such a question, or heard it raised. I had never heard or read the words "counter-revolution" inside the government, and was never to hear it again.

McNaughton walked over to the door of his office, with his

handful of papers. He went on: "If I thought that...if I really believed that...I couldn't go on sitting where I am, in this office." He gestured with the papers, toward his desk. Then he shrugged, and went inside.

I was struck by the question, but I don't recall thinking any further about it at the time, or for a long time after. McNaughton never raised the subject again, and he continued to sit in that office till he died, in June of 1967. I helped him, as his assistant, working almost entirely on Vietnam, from August of 1964 till July of 1965, when I went to Vietnam.

In retrospect, it would not be correct to say that what we did together was "nothing but" counterrevolution. But for the US Government, that would be a good first approximation. And for what he and I did with respect to Vietnam, it would be a lot closer than that.